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Read a Book, Get Out of Jail

by Leah Price

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In a scuffed-up college classroom, fourteen people page through a short story by T. Coraghessan Boyle. They debate the date at which the action is set: when was the Bel Air released, and what was the drinking age in New York State that year? They question moral responsibility: when the driver of the Bel Air assaults a girl, should his impulse be blamed on peer pressure, hormones, drink, sin? To which the man at the head of the table rejoins, "There's a kind of complexity to human experience that isn't always recognized .. You try to figure out who's right and who's wrong, but sometimes both are wrong, right?"

Of the fourteen, twelve are male. One is an English professor, two are judges, two probation officers; seven are convicted criminals who have been granted probation in exchange for attending (and doing the homework for) six biweekly seminars on literature. Changing Lives Through Literature is an alternative sentencing program that allows felons to choose between going to jail and joining a book club. At weekly meetings, students discuss fiction, memoirs and the occasional poem; authors range from Frederick Douglass to John Steinbeck to Toni Morrison, topics from the personal (self-mutilation, family quarrels) to the political (the Holocaust, the Montgomery bus boycott).

Robert Waxler, the U Mass Dartmouth professor who sits at the head of the table, founded CLTL in 1991 together with a judge and a probation officer; since then, it's expanded to a dozen states. Led (unlike most prison-based literacy programs) by literature professors, the program has brought thousands of convicts to college campuses in the same decade when the withdrawal of Pell Grants from prisoners (ruled ineligible for federal college funding in 1994) drove a wedge between the two state-funded institutions where teenagers do time. Meanwhile, rehabilitative reading has spread from Waxler's original all-male seminar to similar women-only and mixed sex groups, to one-time experiments like the seminar on "The Road Not Taken" to which, earlier this year, a Vermont judge sentenced 28 young partiers who broke into Robert Frost's old house, leaving a trail of booze and vomit.

Picture Remembrance of Things Past as a literary ankle bracelet that keeps you chained to the desk for months; imagine a cop lobbing War and Peace at a fugitive. The terms Waxler uses at the opening session have one foot in literary criticism and another in psychotherapy: "exploration," "ambiguity," "journeying." But new-age gerunds give way to old-fashioned imperatives when the professor hands off to the probation officer: good cop, bad cop. Or rather, ambivalent cop: "I don't want to be all negative," the officer begins, "but you have to read this book." Not as in a must-read, but as in "we've had people go to jail for not reading."

Any schoolchild knows that there's nothing new about required reading, or even about reading as punishment: for centuries, teachers have offered a choice between a line of poetry to memorize and a stroke of the cane. Since the Vietnam draft ended, however, college professors like me have rarely had the obligation (or the opportunity) to hand bad students over to the secular arm. Seminar dynamics change when a sheriff sits at the table, ready (in the intervals of sharing his feelings about the literary characters) to suspend probation if a student skips the homework. One instructor pauses to search for a

euphemism before explaining that "it's a condition of their – situation – that they have to do the reading." Another describes the program as "Hallmark with teeth."

Some turns of the discussion could come out of my own Harvard classrooms: one student compares the story to a movie whose title he can't remember, another ventures a guess, a third interjects that one of the characters reminds him of himself when he was a kid, except that "there's a line I didn't cross"; he leaves it at that. But the absence of notebooks -- whether paper or digital -- isn't the only reminder that the participants come through a different route. One, pressed to substantiate his description of Boyle's thuggish characters as "good kids," responds that "they went to college, they came out of high school." Finishing twelfth grade can't be taken for granted among criminal offenders (whose average reading level hovers somewhere around the eighth); nor can access to a library card, or even to campus. On the day that Boyle is being discussed, one man is missing class because his halfway house has imposed lockdown; another has landed in jail.

Literature is hardly the only subject of court-ordered discussion. CLTL looks less exotic when you remember how many probation sentences require attendance at twelve-step programs. There, too, stories provide a catalyst -- with the difference that in CLTL, those narratives belong to fictional characters, not to participants themselves. Oversharers are politely cut off; one whispers the rest of an autobiographical anecdote to the guy next to him, another waits for the break. Yet the professor himself talks of "working through," and as I listen to the words students use to describe literary characters, it's hard not to hear echoes of time spent in rehab: "he made some bad choices," "she hadn't figured out a healthy way to deal with the problem," "he hit bottom before realized that it just wasn't him."

Conversely, plenty of Americans on the right side of the law use literary characters as therapeutic proxies. Oprah's book club has taught us all to reduce (or elevate) books to prompts for cathartic discussion of childhood traumas, relationship conflicts, and self-esteem deficits. Like the O-list, CLTL's canon is low on omniscient narrative, high on first-person or strongly-focalized representations of individual consciousness. The difference is that Oprah's constituency is likelier to be found in the kitchen than in the courtroom: like public-library borrowers, members of book clubs are disproportionately white and even more disproportionately female.

Here, the demographics are different. Of the ten students, nine are men -- not too different from the proportions in the criminal justice system. The professor, graduate student, probation officers, and judges are white; so are some of the students, but the absence of uniforms doesn't make it hard to tell who's who. The course depends, however, on suspending those differences for the space of two hours. "The stories serve as a mirror for everyone," Waxler tells me, "not just the offenders -- the professors, the probation officers, the judge." The average court official is more literate than the average convict, but not necessarily more literary: for them, too, two hours of discussion can be a revelation.

The program was founded on the principle of single-sex classes, not least because domestic violence figures prominently among the charges that land students here. Women's classes are heavy on female-authored accounts of dysfunctional families, men's on hunting and fishing and drinking yarns. Today, many states favor mixed-sex classes, although men predominate in CLTL as they do in the judicial system as a whole; teachers

(just as predictably) skew female. Jean Trounstein, who founded a course for women on the model of the initial male-only program, found that husbands and boyfriends complained or even sabotaged women's class preparation; in contrast, wives and girlfriends have asked to borrow the books or to sit in on the classes.

Reading has always provided a lifeline for prisoners, whether for utilitarian purposes (law books are the most tattered in prison libraries) or for spiritual searching. During the Bush administration, faith-based charities and even megachurches have rushed to fill the vacuum left by the drop in federal education funds, stocking chapel libraries with bibles and Christian self-help books. In 2006, when *Beard v. Banks* upheld a prison's right to deny inmates in solitary confinement access to printed matter, religious and legal books were excepted. (Books, the ruling claimed, could be used to fling feces or start fires.)

A broader literary tradition stretching from medieval English dream visions to Solzhenitsyn's novels situates the most intense and uninterrupted reading in prison. ("Cell" can refer to the space in which monks write as easily as to a room in jail.) Mandela's memoirs make Robben Island sound like a liberal-arts college (with the lime quarry replacing a football field): texts exchanged, debated, interpreted line-by-line. Traditionally, books offered virtual escape from physical confinement. In alternative sentencing programs, though, books provide a more literal alternative to incarceration.

An even bigger difference is that in religious conversion narratives as in political memoirs, the books that change lives are either smuggled in or put to uses very different than those that librarians imagined. (Malcolm X's road to Black Power began with the dictionary entry for "armadillo"). In CLTL, however, the authorities act not as censors, but as suppliers.

The program is easy to dismiss as utopian, or worse: Waxler reports being berated by parents paying college tuition for the same classes that felons receive for free. But if the program works, its economic logic is unassailable: running the program costs \$500 a head, as opposed to \$30,000 for even one year of incarceration. It's a big if. The most conclusive study, which shows CLTL participants achieving half the recidivism rate of a control group, involved fewer than 100 people. More importantly, the literacy level needed to participate makes its population a self-selecting one; and even among those students with the skills to participate, many never make it to the final session. On the day that Boyle is discussed, one man is missing class because his halfway house has imposed lockdown; another has landed in jail. "The program takes participants out of the penal system," according to Marty Rojas, who leads a CLTL seminar in Rhode Island, "but it happens in the shadow of that system."

"Poetry," WH Auden once wrote, "makes nothing happen." Waxler insists that "literature can make a difference" -- more specifically, that lives are touched by printed art as they couldn't be by sitting around the table arguing about a movie, a song, a self-help book, or one's own childhood. The probation officer begins by telling participants that "this program isn't a miracle," but it works in mysterious ways. One possibility is that reading stories allows participants to craft narratives (whether conscious or not) about their own past and future. In a study of more traditional twelve-step programs, the criminologist Shadd Maruna has argued that recovery from addiction requires the ability to distinguish a "before" from an "after." Searching for words to explain the mechanism

by which literature "changes" readers, participants come up with "turning-points," "epiphanies," even "grace." "When it's working," says Waxler, "this discussion has a kind of magic to it."

There's nothing surprising about the idea that certain books teach lessons -- whether the Bible or *The Last Lecture*. Here, though, the medium becomes the message: the act of reading changes (or as we used to say, converts), even when the texts being read contain no explicit moral injunctions. Like Sunday-school pupils, graduates from CLTL are given a book along with their diploma. It hardly matters that the traditional leatherette bible is replaced by a sleek black volume from the Library of America.